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TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM TI

SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN'S SDPT CHAIRMAN SUFFERS STROKE, ALLEGES FOUL PLAY

CLASSIFIED BY: William Hamer, IPO, State, State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Rahmatullo Zoyirov, Chairman of the Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan (SDPT) met with PolOff July 13 after suffering a minor stroke two weeks earlier. Zoyirov, an energetic opposition politician, was noticeably absent during the Embassy's official opening on June 28 and the July 4 reception. After the stroke, Zoyirov says he went into hiding so no one would notice that half of his body was paralyzed. Since then, he has recovered tremendously and gained most of the movement in his body, but is visibly weak. His walk is slow and the right side of his body shows little movement.

¶2. (C) Zoyirov (48) claims that prior to the stroke, he had no health problems. Doctors recently examined him and declared that his body is perfectly healthy despite suffering the stroke. Because of this sudden attack, Zoyirov and his deputies suspect he was poisoned. As a frequent critic of the government, Zoyirov has been the target of government harassment. In May the General Prosecutor's office called him in for several days of questioning about his previous legal work defending alleged Hizb-ut Tahrir members. Over the past few months, Ministry of Security officials have allegedly questioned Zoyirov's neighbors and asked them to spy on him. His daughter has even been followed at school, he said.

¶3. (C) Because the SDPT is largely driven by Zoyirov's personality and public character, the party has not publicly released information on Zoyirov's health. Public knowledge that Zoyirov is unhealthy and suffered a stroke could hurt the party's already weak morale and membership base. When asked about Zoyirov's whereabouts, party officials explain he is traveling out of the country.

¶4. (C) Zoyirov will seek treatment in Moscow and possibly

elsewhere in Europe. He asked PolOff's assistance in obtaining medicine from the United States. He said the medicine his doctor prescribed cannot be found easily in Tajikistan, and he alleged that all the medicine found in pharmacies are illegal, fake drugs. PolOff wished Zoyirov well and assured him that she would see what she could do.

¶15. (C) COMMENT: Regardless of whether Zoyirov was poisoned or suffered a stroke naturally, his deteriorating health strikes a blow to the SDPT. The party's membership has declined significantly. Newspaper articles continue to slander the SDPT as well as other perceived opposition groups. Known as the country's top lawyer, Zoyirov is well-respected and no one else in the party has the same national recognition, primarily because Zoyirov, before he went into opposition, was President Rahmonov's chief legal advisor and played a key role in drafting Tajikistan's first constitution.

¶16. (C) COMMENT CONT'D: Of the eight registered political parties, only four are considered genuine parties that offer an alternative viewpoint to the ruling People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan: the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRPT), the Socialist Party (SPT), the Democratic Party (DPT) and the SDPT. Of these four, the IRPT's chairman, Said Abdullo Nuri is ill with cancer, DPT Chairman Mahmmadruzi Iskandarov is serving a 23-year prison sentence, and the SPT has split into two factions. The legally-registered SPT faction allies itself with the government, and the unregistered faction has been pushed to the sidelines and lost the majority of its membership. Although President Rahmonov and the PDPT hold a monopoly on power, if Zoyirov had to pull out of politics because of health reasons, it would sideline one of the few true opposition parties. His opposition voice serves as a reminder that there are people with alternative viewpoints in Tajikistan. END COMMENT.

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